

# “How Can You Turn Back?”

## The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

*Texts: Galatians 4:8-20; Numbers 14:1-19*

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Whenever legalism rears its ugly head, slavery to the “basic principles of the world” is not far behind. Once enslaved to the basic principles of the world, the blessedness of knowing that Jesus died for the forgiveness of all our sins, and that our Lord fulfilled the law for us so that we can be justified, will soon disappear. Ask a slave if there is joy in bondage. Ask a freeman if he wishes to return to slavery. But this is the very thing the Judaizers were imploring the Galatians to do—turn back to the things which once enslaved them, and this after Jesus came to set them free.

Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia is his response to an attempt by a group of Jewish converts to Christianity to infiltrate the churches which the apostle had recently helped to found, with the express intention of undermining the gospel that Paul previously proclaimed in these churches. Preaching what Paul calls a false gospel, these false teachers—known as the Judaizers—contended that Paul’s gospel of free grace inevitably leads to license. They worked their way into the Galatian churches secretly and began spying on Gentiles exercising their liberty in Christ, then arguing that Paul’s gospel is dangerous because it supposedly encourages people to live in utter disregard to the law of Moses and the traditions of the fathers of Israel. In this incident, we witness a collision between a false gospel based upon human merit and obedience to the law of Moses, and the gospel of Jesus Christ which is anchored in the free and sovereign grace of God, made manifest in the life and death of our Lord.

From the apostle Paul’s perspective, this is a battle over the fundamental nature of Christianity, a battle which determines whether or not Christianity is centered in the redemptive work of Christ, or in human merit, as is typical of all other religions. Paul has made it clear that through faith in Jesus Christ, even Gentiles become heirs to all the promises that God made to Abraham. It is through faith in Christ that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and are justified. None of these blessings come to us because we earn them through good works. Furthermore, by virtue of our union with Christ, all racial and social distinctions specifically related to our standing before God are removed (cf. 3:28). In Christ, there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free. We are now one.

The visible sign and seal of this unity is baptism, through which the believer “puts on Christ.” Once clothed in the robe of Christ’s glorious and perfect righteousness, the believer, who was formerly estranged, an alien, and a foreigner to the things of God, is now regarded as an adopted son or daughter, entitled to the full inheritance from his heavenly father. As such, all believers, whether they be Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, have the privilege of intimate fellowship with God, just as the true Son of God, Jesus Christ did. As God’s adopted children, we too, cry out “Abba, Father.”

We will cover verses 8-20, beginning with Paul’s description in verses 8-10, of the continuing efforts of the Judaizers to infiltrate the Galatian churches with the goal of returning them to the legalistic principles of Judaism. *“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years!”*

Paul is taking up the matter of what happens when full-grown and mature sons and daughters of God return (as mentioned in vv 1-7 of chapter 4) to the “basic principles of the world” (the *stoicheia*) as the means of receiving their inheritance from their Father. Rejecting God’s way and returning to the former way of seeking to establish their own righteousness, the Judaizers strive to gain their inheritance through human merit and external ceremonies instead of through faith in the saving work of Jesus. This raises a number of questions. “What happens when so-called Christians seek to turn back the clock of redemptive history?” “Should we go looking for our inheritance in the endless wilderness of the Sinai?” “Should we seek good things from the slave-masters who ruled over God’s people during their bondage in Egypt?” “Should we seek good things from those who held us captive in Babylon?” Paul’s answer is remind us that should we do so, we have turned our backs on the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Paul exhorts the Galatians to recall their own situation before their collective conversion to Christ. What spiritual condition were they in before the gospel came to Galatia? They did not know God and were enslaved to what Paul calls “beings,” which by nature, are not “gods” at all. The idea of being enslaved to pagan religion and their idols is a theme which also appears in Paul’s first Corinthian letter (8:5), when Paul states “*for although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords—*” The same thing applies in Galatia. These so-called “gods” are nothing.

Before following Jesus, the Galatians served what they thought were “gods,” but which were in reality nothing but idols—lifeless statues, and images, the mere figment of sinful human imagination. When they previously embraced these so-called “basic principles of the world,” the Galatians were rejecting the light of natural revelation and were, as Paul says in Romans 1, guilty of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and were serving created things rather than the creator. God would be perfectly just if he gave them over to their own depravity. But God did not “give them over,” to rightly deserved consequences of their sin. Instead God sent Paul to preach Christ to them. And now, they want to go back to these same principles? Paul’s question, “*how can you turn back again?*” is a loud echo from Numbers 14 (our Old Testament lesson) and the account of Israel’s rebellion against Moses, complete with the demand to return to Egypt. Israel was spared from YHWH’s judgment by Moses’ pleas, just as Paul pleads with the Galatians not to follow Israel’s terrible example.

Since the gospel of Jesus Christ had *been* preached to them—Paul publically placarded Christ before their eyes—the situation has changed radically from the days of paganism. Now the Galatians *do* know God, or rather are known *by* God. The idea of being known by God is a frequent theme throughout Paul’s letters, and implies election unto Christ through effectual calling, wherein God calls elect sinners to faith in Christ when they had been formerly dead in sins and transgressions (cf. Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:1-10).

Paul repeatedly makes this point throughout Galatians. In Galatians 1:6, Paul speaks of God as the “one who called you.” In Galatians 1:15 we learn that God had called Paul from “before his birth.” In Galatians 5:8, Paul again speaks of “the one who calls you.” And in Galatians 5:13, Paul points out that “we were called [for the purpose of being] free.” The gracious God called the Galatians to faith in Jesus through the gospel of Christ crucified when Paul had proclaimed it to them. But the Judaizers were now attempting to lure these Gentile converts away from Christ, by turning them back to the “basic principles of the world” which had formerly enslaved them. The Judaizers are trying to convince freed slaves that slavery was really better than the freedom they now enjoyed!

How can those who know the true God as the creator and sustainer of all things, who have been called by God through the proclamation of the gospel to faith in Jesus, now desire to turn back to the *stoicheia*, the basic principles of the world—that which Paul calls “the weak and miserable principles” of works-

righteousness? Having returning to the *stoicheia*, the Galatians will wake up from a nightmare only to find themselves enslaved by sin and the law all over again. Why would a free man desire to become a slave again? The only way this can happen is through deception. The situation has grown so serious that Paul will later speak of the tragic situation in which certain Galatians, those taken in by these false teachers, actually risk “falling from grace”—a point Paul will make in Galatians 5:4.

That “the basic principles of the world” is a reference to works-righteousness (not to occult or demonic powers), is the fact that once the Galatians had returned to the “basic principles,” immediately, legalism rears its ugly head. This is proven by the fact that these false teachers were demanding that their converts observe special feast days and dietary laws in addition to submitting to circumcision as a means of obtaining or perhaps maintaining a justified standing before God. The Judaizers continued to devote themselves to the Jewish religious calendar and were insisting that Gentiles do the same. Paul’s references to “years,” “months,” and “days,” in verse 10 bears this out. This includes Sabbath observance, religious feasts and festivals, and keeping sabbatical or jubilee years in accordance to Jewish custom—a form of *stoicheia* in light of the coming of faith (Jesus Christ and his person and work).<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the Galatians adopted such legalistic practices marked a return to slavery and was the cause for Paul’s great concern for their eternal well-being. Paul laments in verse 11, “*I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*” Paul knows many of these people quite well. These are people that he obviously cares for deeply. His plea is personal. He has preached the gospel to them face to face. Many of them came to Christ under his ministry. The apostle fears for the state of their souls and worries about their eternal destinies. This is why his warning is so pointed. Paul loves these people and cares deeply for them. This is why he speaks the truth in love.

This is why this section of Galatians takes a much more personal tone. It is likely that word of personal attacks being made upon him in his absence got back to Paul. Paul reminds the Galatians of what had transpired when he had been with them previously, and how their attitude toward him has apparently changed. Making an impassioned personal appeal, Paul reminds them that he himself had previously exchanged his own rigid adherence to the law for faith in Christ, in effect, becoming a Gentile sinner as the Galatians were (cf. Galatians 2:15). Paul pleads with the Galatians to live as he is living, free from bondage to the basic principles and the law (Galatians 5:1) in the liberty purchased for him by Christ.

In verse 12, he pleads, “*brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.*” Previously, the Galatians welcomed him into their midst. Now things are different. There is really no telling what the Judaizers had been saying about Paul to their Gentile converts. The easiest way to undermine Paul’s gospel was to attack Paul personally. Sadly, those so zealous for the law that they hate the gospel, simply ignore what the law says about bearing false witness.

In verses 13-14, Paul reminds his readers of the circumstances (an illness) which brought Paul, and the gospel to the Galatians. “*You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.*” It is implied that Paul was on his way somewhere else when he took ill, and was forced to stop in Galatia to recover. While recuperating, Paul used the opportunity provided by his illness to preach the gospel to his hosts. From our perspective, what appears to be a calamity—a serious illness—God, in his providence, uses to further his eternal purposes. In this case, because of

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<sup>1</sup> Fung, Galatians, 193.

Paul's illness, the gospel was preached to a group who were formerly in darkness, and through this gospel the Galatians had been set free from their bondage to sin.

There is a long history of debate among Paul's interpreters about the exact nature of his illness. The illness was, apparently, quite severe, since Paul refers to the illness as a "trial to you," that is, a trial for the Galatians who took care of him while he was sick. Showing great kindness to him, the Galatians did not treat Paul with scorn, but nursed him back to health. The seriousness of Paul's illness is also indicated in verse 14, when Paul speaks of being a burden to the Galatians. This illness may have had some effect upon his eyes and his vision since Paul says in verse 15 that "*for I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me,*" implying that Paul was having difficulty with his vision. In fact, at the end of the letter, (Galatians 6:11) Paul makes the comment, "*see with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.*" Apparently, Paul's eyesight was still affected when he wrote this epistle some months after leaving the region.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7 ff. Paul describes how "*to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*" On three occasions, Paul says he pled with the Lord to remove it. But God's response was "*my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.*" Whether this is connected to the illnesses which caused Paul to stay with the Galatians is not known. In this case, God used Paul's illness as the means to bring the gospel to Galatia. God alone can turn calamity into good.

In verses 15 and 16, Paul asks the Galatians why their attitude toward him has changed since he had been with them. "*What then has become of your blessedness? Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?*" When Paul had been with them, the Galatians, apparently, experienced the joy ("blessedness") of the knowledge that their sins had been forgiven by the death of Christ, and that God regarded them as righteous, because Christ's righteousness was reckoned to them through faith, not through works. But once the Judaizers wormed their way into the Galatian churches, the joy of the forgiveness of sin gave way to the despair and hopelessness of legalism. Those enslaved to the "basic principles" (legalism) do not know the joy of a right-standing before God, since you never know where you stand, as right-standing is no longer based upon the merits of Christ, but upon one's obedience to the law of God—which is never perfect or enough. The blessedness they once knew is gone.

Paul asks them, "*have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?*" Paul taught these Christians the true gospel of Christ crucified, but then they allowed themselves to be bewitched by the Judaizers. They embraced both the false gospel and those who taught it. In sharp contrast to the way they received the gospel from Paul when he first preached it to them, the Galatians became uncomfortable with the truth, since the truth will force them to admit they are wrong. If they accept Paul's gospel they will be forced to remove the Judaizers from among their midst. Since Paul was confronting them with this truth, apparently, some of them who were formerly close to Paul, now regarded him as an enemy. From Paul's perspective this is heart-breaking.

Paul exposes the Judaizers's true intentions in verse 17. "*They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.*" Paul echoes much the same sentiment in Galatians 6:12, when he mentions that the Galatians were afraid of standing up for the truth, they were afraid of being persecuted because of the gospel. The gospel is a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek. But the "basic principles of the world" are already accepted by the Judaizers and those following them—a point which will come up later when Paul mentions that the

Judaizer's great boast was the large number of converts they had made.

Unable to refute Paul's gospel, the Judaizers tried to drive a wedge between Paul and the Galatians by destroying Paul's credibility. Paul speaks of the great zeal of the Judaizers and the fact that they want those who they have bewitched to be equally zealous for their cause. Paul tells them in verse 18, "*it is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you.*" But what was the purpose of Judaizers? Good? Hardly. Their purpose was to zealously attack the gospel. That deception was involved is clear when Paul introduces the subject of hypocrisy. The Galatians acted one way when Paul was with them, and another when he was away. Paul has no patience with hypocrisy.

It is important to remember that even though Paul is furious with the Judaizers and has lambasted the Galatians for tolerating their deception and acting hypocritically themselves, he nevertheless demonstrates his strong affection for them, still speaking of them as in verses 19-20, as "*my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone.*" Paul was, after all, the one who had first preached the gospel to them. In a real sense he is their spiritual father. He speaks of the situation in terms which are difficult to understand. He describes his pain and his anguish over the Galatians in terms of the pain of childbirth as "Christ is formed in them." The language here is a bit difficult.

The very thought that the Galatians were defecting from the true gospel causes Paul great anguish. He describes his perplexity (v. 20b), his fear (v. 11), his anger (1:6; 5:12) as sharp pains—spiritual birth pains. When Christ is finally formed in them, then his anguish will be over. To express his desire that Christ is formed in his people, Paul uses a verb (*morphousthai*) which refers to the development of a fetus.<sup>2</sup> This idea of "forming Christ" in them as a fetus is formed in a mother's womb, is similar to Paul's statement in Colossians 3:10, where he writes that "*and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator,*" or Ephesians 4:24 where he writes, "*and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*" When Paul is speaking of Christ being formed in them, he is speaking in terms of sanctification and the "new man," as the Galatians are slowly being "morphed," into Christ, as they are freed from obedience to the law as the basis for their right standing before God, and slavery to the basic principles as a way of life.

As a faithful shepherd, Paul laments to his spiritual children, "*for I am perplexed about you!*" How could the Galatians exchange their inheritance in Christ to return slavery to law and bondage to the "basic principles," which they supposedly rejected when they came to faith? Paul wishes that he could be with the Galatians and change his "tone"—his angry rebuke—so that together they could share the joy they experienced when Paul first preached the gospel to them and they accepted it in faith. In these words, we get a glimpse at the pastoral heart of Paul, and his uncompromising, yet tender concern for his flock. He reminds us of what we stand to lose if we ever return to the "basic principles of the world," and likewise see our own obedience to the law of Moses as a means of justification. To put it bluntly, should we fall prey to this, we risk losing everything!

There are three important points of application for us here. First, let us not think for a moment that a similar occurrence cannot happen to us. If the Judaizers could work their way into a church that had been founded by the apostle Paul himself, just months earlier, they can worm their way in anywhere. We must always be on our guard for any form of the "basic principles" of legalism. We must, like Paul,

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<sup>2</sup> Fung, Galatians, 202-203.

evaluate everything taught in the church by the word of God, and even if an angel from heaven, a Reformed theologian, even your own pastor, teaches any gospel other than the one Paul teaches, they must be rebuked from the Scriptures. Please pray for those entrusted with the task of shepherding God's flock and driving the wolves away. The best defense against the false gospel is to know the true gospel. This is why we must teach both the Scriptures and the catechism to our children. Error is most easily exposed in the light of the truth. If we are not catechizing them, then our pagan culture is.

Second, there is much to learn about today's Judaizers from the Judaizers of Galatia. Today's Judaizers also attack by arguing that the gospel of free grace leads to license. They convincingly argue that *if* we teach that salvation is a free gift and that we are saved by the merits of Christ received by faith alone apart from works, then there is no role for humanity to play in salvation. It just doesn't make sense for God to leave us out! Judaizers will contend that any abuse of freedom is proof that the gospel of free grace is dangerous. Freedom can be frightening for those who are used to being a slave. Playing upon fear of the abuse of freedom, the modern Judaizers rarely need to make a frontal assault upon the gospel.

Instead, Judaizers advance their agenda not by leaps and bounds but by millimeters. Upon finding any abuse of freedom, the Judaizer argues that "we need a new law or a rule" to stop that particular behavior. This sounds like a good thing to do. Then, once the new rule is in place, the Judaizer says, "the truly converted would never do that," i.e., "break the new rule." Then they find another abuse, establish another rule using the same rationale, and soon thereafter measure people by it. It all sounds so reasonable and it happens so slowly that often times we never notice. The rules might even be good rules and they might even stop the errant behavior—for a time. But before long we have been boiled alive, like the proverbial frog in the beaker of water, who does not squirm when the water temperature is brought up to fatal levels at such a slow pace that the poor frog never even notices. Before long, we are not looking to the cross and merits of Christ, we are looking to our own efforts and rule-keeping.

There will be some who lose the assurance of salvation, because they cannot keep the rules, and think that God has abandoned them. Others will be quite good at keeping the rules, and think that they are better than those who don't. Some will debate the rules and turn the church—which is to be a haven and a hospital for justified sinners—into a modern Sanhedrin, where we will miss the weightier matters because we were too busy fighting over trivialities. The first things to go are freedom in Christ and the joy of our salvation. Some may take this so far that they, like certain of the Galatians, risk falling from grace.

Third, it is no accident that when Paul speaks of slavery, he connects it to the loss of the Galatian's blessedness (or, "joy," in some translations). "What happened?" asks Paul. Joy is that emotional state of confidence in knowing that our sins are forgiven and that we have been granted a right status before God. Joy is not the same thing as happiness and is not directly connected to the ups and downs and material well-being of daily life as is happiness. In the Scriptures, joy is the emotional response by the people of God to God's redemptive acts. It is produced by the knowledge that God is no longer angry at us since Christ has died for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification. Joy, in the biblical sense, is an emotion that arises as a response to the gospel and the declaration that we have "peace with God" through the blood of Christ.

But the false gospel of the Judaizers robs God's people of the assurance of salvation, taking from us our only comfort in life and in death—our joy. There is no joy in free men and women taking up again the shackles of slavery. In Psalm 51, David pleads with God to restore to him the "joy of his salvation," which had been lost to him when he felt God's anger towards his sin. David longs to once again hear "joy and gladness," since he knows that the wickedness of his own heart has manifested itself in sin.

Likewise, Paul's gospel of Christ crucified had created joy among the Galatians, as they too came to know that Christ had died for their sins and they were forgiven.

It is the Judaizer who tells the free man or woman to put back on the chains of salvation by works. It is the Judaizer who tells us to get up from this feast that God has prepared for those who love him and instead go and seek our inheritance in the desert wilderness of the Sinai. It is the Judaizer who tells us to forsake Christ and instead seek the slave-master in Egypt, or a return to exile in Babylon. It is the Judaizer who says, "we cannot be justified by the merits of Christ alone, but must add to Christ's merit our own." It is no wonder Paul asks the Galatians, "what has happened to your joy?" Blessedness is fading fast.

In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes, "Christ loved me and gave himself for me." Paul tells us that we are heirs to the inheritance and all the promises God made to Abraham through faith in Christ. Paul says to us that through faith alone, we have been justified and given the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is where we find blessedness—in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God has never promised us happiness, but he does promise us joy! What is more, God continually comes to us through word and Sacrament and says to us: "you are not guilty for all your many sins because Christ has died for them. Your filthy rags of unrighteousness have been replaced by the glorious righteousness of Christ." If you believed this you know "blessedness."

Yet, it is this message that the Judaizers attack and this is why we must always oppose them. They will do their best to steal from us whatever joy we do have. This is why we must shout the gospel from the rooftops, for the darkness of error is dispelled in the light of the truth! This is why we must hear it again as often as possible. This is why Paul's question has so much power: "How can you turn back?" when it is only in the saving work of Jesus Christ—not in our own obedience—that we find the joy of salvation!

Amen!